

## It's not OK to skimp on restaurant inspections

**Legislature must provide funds to conduct required checks.**

By REGISTER EDITORIAL BOARD

The public should be confident that restaurants are regularly visited by government inspectors to help ensure dining is not hazardous to one's health.

That confidence has been shaken in Iowa in recent weeks. State officials have cut back inspections at some restaurants and acknowledge they will fail to conduct the two annual inspections required by state law. They have no choice because they lack the resources.

A tight budget is no excuse for failure to enforce the law. Next session, the Legislature must revamp how restaurant inspections are performed and paid for in Iowa to ensure compliance with its own mandate.

The issue came to a head when two counties - Polk and Jasper - decided to quit doing restaurant inspections and turn the job over to the state. But the state Department of Inspections and Appeals has a staff of only nine inspectors to cover 20 other counties. Their workload just doubled.

DIA chief Steven Young assures that public health is not at risk, but he concedes the department will not be able to do the required two annual inspections in those 22 counties. In fact, it turns out, the law has not been followed for all restaurants for some time. Fees collected for restaurant inspections haven't fully covered the costs, so some weren't done twice yearly.

Young's department has lobbied the Legislature for a fee increase for several years, but to no avail. Last session, both houses passed a bill that would have moved restaurant inspections to the state Department of Health, but with no additional resources. Gov. Tom Vilsack vetoed the bill - rightly pointing out that the bill ignored the bigger issue: The state and the counties that do their own inspections are losing \$800,000 a year on the program.

There is an obvious and simple solution to this complicated problem: The General Assembly should raise fees for restaurant inspections so state and local governments have sufficient resources to do the job.

Legislators mandated two inspections a year believing the public deserves that level of protection. It is unconscionable that it won't provide adequate resources to get the job done. It makes sense to cover inspection costs with fees derived from the businesses that benefit from the inspections and their customers.

Any number of excuses are cited for why the Legislature has failed to adequately cover inspection costs, but it's time to drop the excuses and act. Iowans deserve to have confidence that restaurant fare is safe and wholesome. Rather than protect those within the restaurant industry who oppose higher inspection fees, the Legislature should look out for the public.

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